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'Re-entry Sunday' meant to help ex-convicts get jobs

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I was in prison and you did not look after me whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." (Matthew 25:40).

Clarence Scott, Larry Condrey and Anthony Barnes are among "the least of these." Ranging in age from 24 to 53, they are attempting to re-enter their Southeast community after years of imprisonment. They are spending hours at the Learning Lab in St. Luke's Catholic Church on East Capitol Street SE trying to resist a return to their former lives of crime.

Not easy, they concede. They need help — lots of it.

Scott has mastered his computer-training courses, but with no experience, he can't get a job. Condrey resides in a halfway house near Blue Plains and had to travel by public transit to Reisterstown, Md., because of bureaucratic red tape, just to secure the identification card issued to nondrivers. Barnes studied and thought he was prepared for the high school equivalency exam, but the test was revamped recently and made harder.

In an effort to provide much-needed assistance in these men's self-help efforts, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) established Jan. 13 as "Re-entry Sunday."

Chosen to coincide with the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Re-entry Sunday "is a call to service" for mentors who "seek a different kind of ministry, a redemptive ministry that helps redirect the energy of offenders coming back home," said Jasper Ormond, interim director of CSOSA.

January is also National Mentoring Month. "Helping hands are healing hands and the men and women returning home from prison need your help, your prayers and your compassion," reads the cards that will be passed out Sunday.

Ministers in the 39 participating churches will devote part of their services to educating their congregations and to calling upon parishioners to volunteer in helping offenders reconnect with their families, communities and places of worship.

That these returning offenders "are sons and daughters of the neighborhood," Mr. Ormond said is a point the ministers will emphasize.

Next month, mentors will be trained to work with their charges, as well as provide spiritual support and guidance.

That's no easy task. The biggest hurdles returning offenders face are securing a job and securing affordable housing. Overcoming drug addiction, childhood abandonment and abuse and low literacy rates are other obstacles.

St. Luke's, in the 6th Police District, is an ideal location for such a faith-based program because "it is surrounded by drug activity," said Condrey, who returned from a Pennsylvania prison in November and is staying in Hope Village, a nearby halfway house.

"If you've been out of the work force for years and you come to the church, they can direct you," Condrey said. "When employers know you've been dealing with church and programs in the church, they are more likely to hire you."

CSOSA was formed in 1997 from pretrial, parole and probation entities and now keeps track of returning offenders. It operates halfway houses, but former inmates can stay only six months. Then they're out on their own.

The District has about 16,000 inmates and roughly 2,500 a year will be released and many will return to their old neighborhoods. The average length of supervision is three years. The national rate of recidivism is 62 percent.

Do the math. It's not a pretty picture. A majority of D.C. parolees are re-arrested within eight months of release, according to CSOSA statistics.

In the District, a church, synagogue or mosque sits on nearly every corner. But the Rev. Donald Isaac, a leading minister in the Re-entry Sunday project, said, "Our churches have gotten comfortable behind their walls but the church has critical role to play" to meet the needs of ex-offenders "spiritually, emotionally and physically."

"Everybody wants a better way of living regardless of age and [the church-based program] keeps hope alive. You can still believe in the system if you do the right thing," said Scott. "I'm participating in the process."

The first floor of St. Luke's houses CSOSA's Learning Lab. Here, coordinator Phil Whatley helps Condrey with computer training while he sets up a program that prompts Barnes to prepare a resume.

"If I wasn't [in the program], there's no telling what I'd be doing," said Barnes. He submitted job applications to no avail, so he is "going to try this way now."

Drumming up support or compassion for returning ex-offenders is a hard sell. So let's go where everybody can relate: self-preservation.

If maintaining our personal safety and peace of mind are of any concern, then we might want to get involved in some way to help these folks with few skills and little hope make the tough transition into mainstream society.

Fannie Mae and the Urban Institute have formed a collaboration with CSOSA to develop affordable housing for ex-offenders. Clark Construction has pledged jobs for qualified ex-offenders. Many need vocational training that could lead to establishing a small company since it's hard for them to get hired competing for entry-level positions with college graduates.

As we've witnessed in recent months, it's not a great leap to tie the rise in crime rates across the country to the recession and joblessness.

It's no great secret, as Scott points out, that people who come to believe that they have no option but criminal activity to survive will eventually do what they think they have to do. That's the cold, hard truth.

Faith and prayer go a long way, but "faith without works" misses the mark.